

# Drug abuse deaths increase in W.Va.

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LAURA WILCOX

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CHARLESTON -- Every day, Dr. Jim Berry sees patients who know people who've died from accidental overdoses, yet more and more people are becoming addicted to drugs across the state, he said.



Mark Webb/The Herald-Dispatch

Oxycontin 80's are a commonly abused prescription pill.

On Wednesday, Berry spoke to prevention advocates about an increasing prescription painkiller problem as part of West Virginia's 17th annual Statewide Substance Abuse Prevention Conference at the Charleston Civic Center.

"We've noticed a big problem with prescription pain pills," said Berry, a psychiatrist with the Chestnut Ridge Center at West Virginia University Hospitals and a WVU assistant professor. "A lot of people are dying."

At the conference, which also included workshops and networking opportunities, Berry talked about addiction and the problems faced in West Virginia.

In November 2007, West Virginia led the nation in overdose deaths, Berry said. West Virginia also saw an increase in "poisonous deaths" from 2001 to 2006, he said. Of those deaths, 78 percent were considered to be accidental overdoses -- most involving opioids such as oxycodone or methadone or a combination of various drugs.

Michele Burnside, communication specialist with the West Virginia Prevention Resource Center, estimated that more than 300 people attended the drug prevention events in Charleston over three days. The events began Monday with Gov. Joe Manchin's delivery of his plan to address substance abuse in West Virginia.

"It's kind of a big week for drug abuse prevention," Burnside said. "We've had an excellent turnout."

The conference was held by the Prevention Resource Center in partnership with the West Virginia Prescription Drug Abuse Quitline. In its first year, the quitline has received more than 750 calls for support services, education and resources, said Laura Lander, a counselor who works with the quitline. Lander hopes the 866-WV-QUIT number will continue to be available, though funding to keep it going remains for only one more year. She said it costs about \$500 a day to operate the line, which serves West Virginia and the surrounding states.

Berry said the illegal sale of prescription painkillers is big business across the state and region.

In one Kentucky study, the estimated street value of oxycodone was \$1 per milligram, he said. While a patient may be able to get 80 milligrams of oxycodone at a value of just over \$1,000 from a doctor, those pills may be sold on the street for \$8,000, Berry said.

Berry also talked about the history of opioids, opium and their source -- the poppy plant. There are 35 chemicals in opium, including morphine and codeine, he said.

As the sale of opioids such as oxycodone have risen since the 1990s, so have the number of overdose deaths, Berry said. He said opioids began being prescribed more during the movement in the last couple of decades to treat pain "at all costs."

"At the same time, pharmaceutical companies started doing some very large marketing campaigns," he said.

He said opioids are the new "gateway drug," whereas people used to experiment with drugs such as marijuana.

"Nowadays, more and more people I'm seeing for detox (say they) started using opioids before they starting used anything else ... and at a very young age," he said.

Berry said he talks to patients going through detox on a regular basis. Of those, he said 90 percent of them say they know people who have died from accidental overdoses. One patient said he knew seven people who had died in just one month.

More and more people are getting painkillers in illegal ways, going "doctor shopping" to get multiple prescriptions, stealing or even getting pills from family or friends, Berry said.

He said doctor shopping is a serious problem that can be prevented if more physicians and pharmacists will utilize the West Virginia Board of Pharmacy database at [www.wvbop.com](http://www.wvbop.com). There, pharmacists may enter prescription and patient information that physicians can access.

Berry said patients also need to lock pills up, away from children and potential thieves.

Part of the problem also lies in improper prescribing. Berry said that's most often due to a doctor's lack of knowledge, but sometimes those errors are intentional.

"Most doctors are trying to do the best they can ... However, there are some bad doctors out there," he said.

Professionals and advocates from across the state attended the conference on Wednesday, including some from Cabell County.

From Raleigh County, Carrilyn Carey of the Shaped Youth Coalition attended the conference to learn more about environmental factors and prevention strategies.

"We're always interested in the prevention of drug abuse, especially among youth," she said.

She said the conference provided excellent training, too.

Mary R. Harris of Charleston's YWCA Sojourner's shelter also attended the sessions and said the networking was a great benefit. She works with kids in an after-school program in Charleston and said many of those children's parents are or were drug addicts.

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